

Repealing Don't Ask Don't Tell

Written by Mike Honda

Thursday, 11 February 2010 07:18

During his State of the Union address on January 27, President Obama declared that his administration would work with Congress to end the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of excluding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans from serving their country in the armed forces. I have long envisioned our country reaching this moment and am thrilled that we will soon reach another victory in our long fought struggle for equality regardless of race, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation. During the 110th Congress, I co-sponsored HR 1246 to repeal the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. This past Tuesday February 2, 2010, the Senate Committee on Armed Services received testimony from Robert M. Gates, the Secretary of Defense, who expressed his strong support for President Obama's call and outlined steps to repeal this law. Also issuing his support was Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff.

The last time Congress tackled this inequality was 15 years ago; although the circumstances may be different – America finds itself in two wars and there has been a notable societal opening toward acceptance of gay Americans – there have also been some recent electoral and legal setbacks. Last year, the California State Supreme Court ruled that Proposition 8 was legal; voters approved this proposition in November 2008 effectively stripping gay Americans of their constitutional right to marry. The struggle to repeal Proposition 8 has moved on to the United States federal district court in San Francisco.

Reflecting one of our country's last officially sanctioned forms of bigotry, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy stigmatizes patriotic Americans by excluding them from military life. This policy works to silence LGBT personnel among the ranks of our military, making them invisible to the American public they bravely volunteer to defend. Notwithstanding the "

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Tell" policy, countless veterans have, and continue to serve selflessly in the defense of our nation. Yet while thousands of our men and women continually serve to protect our freedom and liberty and put their lives on the line to do so, many are dismissed once their orientation or identification becomes known. According to Steve Ralls, Director of Communications for Service members Legal Defense Network (SLDN), over 1,200 service personnel were unfairly stigmatized when discharged as being unfit for service in 2001. It is the right of all Americans to live open lives within society, free from prejudice, intolerance, and fear, irrespective of race, ethnicity, age and perceived sexual orientation and gender. The contributions made by LGBT veterans, and those in active duty in an atmosphere hostile to them, underscores the

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tremendous sacrifices they make to serve this nation.

While President Obama's call is a momentous move in the right direction, Secretary Gates also reminded the Senators that the ultimate decision of how much to change the policy rests with the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Both Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen declared their commitment to prepare the Department and armed forces to implement the specific changes to the law by the end of the calendar year. I appreciate the difficulty of their task and I commend their courage to take this step forward for our country. However, we cannot let this opportunity to right this wrong pass us by. Let us also not forget that every significant victory on the road toward fulfilling our founders' promise of liberty and justice for all has not come without a committed movement behind it.